



# **CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF DOCUMENTARY PRODUCTIONS IN MALAYSIA**

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**Master of Computer Science  
(Multimedia Computing)**

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IN MALAYSIA**

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MALAYSIA**

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in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Computer Science  
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## DECLARATION

I declare that this project entitled “Critical Analysis of Documentary Productions in Malaysia” is the result of my own research except as cited in the references. The project has not been accepted for any degree and is not concurrently submitted in candidature of any other degree.

Signature : .....

Name : .....

Date : .....

## **APPROVAL**

I hereby declare that I have read this project and in my opinion this project is sufficient in terms of scope and quality for the award of Master of Computer Science (Multimedia Computing).

Signature : .....

Supervisor Name : .....

Date : .....

## **ABSTRACT**

Audience acceptances of local documentary in Malaysia have lessened compared to those produced abroad which received an overwhelming response from local audiences. The documentary production industry in Malaysia seems increasingly miserable as a result of the cold reception from the audience. Therefore, this study focuses on assessing the current situation of local documentary production, identifying weaknesses of Malaysian produced documentary and make recommendations on how to improve the production of documentaries in Malaysia. Preliminary investigation, observations and interviews were conducted in the study in order to obtain useful data that affect the quality of a documentary. These data are then listed as factors that affect the quality of a documentary in the form of a conceptual diagram. A “Best Practices” was produced in the form of a Checklist as a guide for local documentary productions to produce a better documentary film.

## ABSTRAK

*Penerimaan penonton terhadap dokumentari tempatan di Malaysia dilihat semakin berkurangan berbanding dokumentari luar yang mendapat sambutan yang menggalakkan dari penonton tempatan. Akibat daripada penerimaan penonton yang kurang menggalakkan, industri produksi dokumentari dilihat semakin suram di Malaysia ini. Justeru itu, kajian ini memfokuskan untuk mengkaji situasi semasa produksi dokumentari tempatan, mengenalpasti kelemahan-kelemahan dokumentari Malaysia berbanding dokumentari luar dan memberi cadangan tentang bagaimana untuk memperbaiki penghasilan dokumentari di Malaysia. Dengan menggunakan kaedah siasatan awal, pemerhatian dan temuramah, kajian ini telah mendapatkan data-data yang mempengaruhi kualiti sesebuah dokumentari. Data-data tersebut kemudiannya disenaraikan menjadi faktor yang mempengaruhi kualiti sesebuah dokumentari dalam bentuk diagram. Sebuah “Amalan Terbaik” dihasilkan dalam bentuk Senarai Semak untuk membantu produksi-produksi dokumentari tempatan menghasilkan sebuah filem dokumentari yang lebih baik.*

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.0 Introduction**

A documentary can be defined as an important genre that is situated “somewhere between art, entertainment, and journalism,” that serve the audience’s need for factual information, informed learning, and entertainment (Vladica & Davis 2009). Basically, documentary is about sharing our own useful experience with others. It might seem as a usual experience to us, but for some people from another part of the world would find them as something new and interesting. If you can find a way to turn your personal experience into a universally shared or recognized experience, you have the foundation for building a documentary (West n.d.).

Yasin (2007) in his writing entitled “History and Development of Documentary Production in Malaysia” stated that, documentary filmmaking started in Malaysia (formerly known as Malaya) under British colonial rule soon after the Second World War in 1946 which was influenced by “documentary film movement” led by John Grierson in Britain. The Malayan Film Unit was established as a propaganda tool to deliver the government’s information. In 1947, the first documentary film was produced by Malayan Film Unit which described the housing problems faced by Malaya’s urban and rural people entitled “Face of Malaya”.

A few years later, documentary film played a big role during the insurgency of Party Communist of Malaya in 1950 to disseminate the propaganda campaign against the communist. There were 24 emergency films and 250 gazettes films produced to disseminate the government's information to the people of Malaya (Yasin 2007). Among the popular documentary films at that time were "More Communists Give Up", "The Surrendered Enemy Personnel", "Journey by Jungle River" and "Proudly Presenting Yong Peng". In addition, some of those films managed to won awards including Best Documentary 1955, Best Planning in 1956 Diploma of Merit 1957 and Best Non Dramatic Film 1957. Another renaissance of documentary filmmaking in Malaya was during the preparation of Malayan independence in 1957. The purpose of documentary programs at that time was to educate people towards establishing their own government, with the help of documentaries such as Why Register?, How to Vote?, Milestone to Merdeka and Merdeka for Malaya.

In 1963, television was introduced where it has successfully provided the audience with free visual information and entertainment. Local television channel was then established and Malayan Film Unit has changed its name to Filem Negara in 1965 carrying the same purpose and objective. Since then, commercial films started to grow as an effect of television and are well accepted among the audience, Filem Negara started to focus on supporting commercial film as it generates more income. The growth of the television industry and the impact of commercialism on television were to be blamed for the diminishing of documentary programmes produced by Filem Negara in the national television schedules (Yasin 2007). That was the fall of documentary films production in Malaysia as the audience keep on wanting more for commercial films.

Since Astro launches its first satellite TV in Malaysia in 1996, documentary film seems to rise again from its fall as the subscribers of international documentaries channels such as National Geographic, Discovery Channel, and History Channel keep on expanding from time to time. Sadly at this time, the demand is not for local documentary anymore. The audience prefer to choose foreign documentaries rather than locally produced documentaries. The audience cannot be blamed for this as they have their rights to choose what is best for them. This study will investigate this issue in an attempt to help documentary production in Malaysia such as Agro Jurnal, Destinasi Bajet, and Majalah 3 to survive.

### **1.1 Project Background**

Documentaries production is growing rapidly over the past decades. The demands for documentaries are increasing yearly causing some big production studios made their own documentaries to make it to the big screen. Big production companies such as Walt Disney Studio produces Disney's African Cats which was released in 2011 with Samuel L. Jackson as the narrator. They even have their Disney Nature as their division of Walt Disney Studios only to focus on natural documentary films. Toronto, Amsterdam and Sheffield are among the cities that have successfully organised major documentary film festival. According to Vladica and Davis (2009), Documentary Organisation of Canada reported that the Hot Docs International Documentary Festival held in Toronto each year, Canada's largest documentary film festival, increased its annual screening attendance between 1998 and 2007 from 4,000 to 68,000. This proves that documentary is well accepted among the audience.

Malaysian feels the phenomenon of documentaries renaissance as well but unfortunately, not on the locally produced documentaries. Foreign documentaries are more accepted even if they are filming about Malaysia, compared to local documentaries which document the same issue. Documentary filmmakers in Malaysia have tried their best in producing documentaries but it is not good enough to satisfy Malaysian audience. Perbadanan Kemajuan Filem Nasional Malaysia (Finas) has made their steps towards promoting Malaysian documentaries where they had a forum with local film productions called *Industri Dokumentari Malaysia: Menjana Karya Inovatif - Peluang dan Harapan* (Malaysian Documentary Industry: Generating Innovative Artwork – Opportunity and Hope) to discuss the issue faced by local documentary industry (Aziz 2011). Through that forum, Executive Producer of Magazine & Documentary Primeworks Studios, Abdul Hisham Abdullah said that the time has come to establish a local documentary channel as a platform for local documentary programs to be broadcasted as Westerners love to watch Malaysian art and culture. According to Aziz (2011) in his newspaper report, among all of the local TV station, RTM seems to broadcast the most documentary programs with 6 hours of broadcasting time per week for local documentary and 5.5 hours of international documentary.

Over the years, Malaysian documentaries have evolved. However there are still areas that can be improved when compared to the internationally produced documentaries. As an instance, Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM) has produced a documentary called *Agro Jurnal* which covers on Malaysian Stingless Bee while History Channel produced a documentary on Africanised Honey Bee. The example of comparison is as in the Table 1.1 below.

Table 1.1: Example of Comparison Between Local and International Documentary



<b>History Cannel's</b> <b>Monster Quest: Africanised Honey bee</b> (International Documentary)	<b>RTM's</b> <b>Agro Jurnal: Malaysian Stingless Bee</b> (Local Documentary)	<b>Description</b>
		Establishing shot



Table 1.1 Example of Comparison Between Local and International Documentary (continues)




			
	<p>Extreme Close up shot</p>	<p>MEL RAY FIREFIGHTER</p>	<p>Interview shot</p>

Table 1.1 Example of Comparison Between Local and International Documentary (continues)

		<p>Graphical illustration representation</p>
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Both local and international documentaries covered on a similar topic but there are huge differences in their approach. RTM focuses on promoting the honey produced by the stingless bee while History Channel focuses more on educating the audience on why and how does the bee migrate into USA. The main intend of RTM in promoting the honey of stingless bee seems failed since they did not make any comparison between honey produced by stingless bee and honey bee in terms of its benefits since it is the main factor to attract the audience in choosing the stingless bee's honey and there are not much of scientific facts provided as a new knowledge to the audience. History Channel manages to provide the audience with historical facts on how did the Africanised honey bee gets into USA from South America. They even investigate on how far can the bee chased its victims out, how can it adapt in colder climate and higher altitude as its spreading towards North USA. Besides that, RTM did not include any new footage of the stingless bee while History Channel included footage of heat detector camera in showing the heat produced by the honey bees which can be rarely seen by the audience added up another weakness to the local documentary.

Several famous overseas filmmakers have shared key factors which according to them can construct a good documentary. Julie Matlin (2010) in a post of her blog, "What Makes a Great Documentary?" managed to share some key factors quoted from several famous documentary filmmakers as in Table 1.2 below.

Table 1.2: Keyfactors Shared by Some Filmmakers

Filmmakers	Key factors
<b>Garry Beitel,</b> director ( <i>The Socalled Movie, Nothing Sacred</i> )	Able to deliver positive value through compelling cinematic.
<b>Paul Cowan,</b> director ( <i>Paris 1919, Westray</i> )	Able to relate audience's emotion with interesting topic and storyline, supported by real character and atmosphere.
<b>Adam Symansky,</b> producer ( <i>Reel Injun, Roadsworth: Crossing the Line</i> )	Able to take the audience to place they have never been and meet its people.
<b>Thomas Hale,</b> director ( <i>A Year at Sherbrooke</i> )	Able to transport people to a new place.
<b>Katerina Cizek,</b> director ( <i>Highrise, Filmmaker in Residence</i> )	Able to touch audience's feeling to convey subjective messages.
<b>Michael Fukushima,</b> producer/director ( <i>Minoru: Memory of Exile</i> )	Able to deliver messages through artful animation.
<b>Ravida Din,</b> producer ( <i>Nollywood Babylon, Payback</i> )	Able to let the audience analyse and impact with positive thoughts.
<b>Gerry Flahive,</b> producer ( <i>Invisible City, Paris 1919</i> )	Able to transfer information in a creative way.

There are plenty of factors defined by these filmmakers from their own experience and perspective. This study will probe into our local documentaries and identify what

factors that can make Malaysia's documentaries appealing as the international ones. Based on the factors defined above, here are examples of factors that can determine the impact of a documentary.

**1. Positive Moral value**

A documentary must be able to deliver positive values that affect the audience.

**2. Able to relate with audience feeling and emotion.**

How creative in plotting the storyline to play with audience's emotions.

**3. Storytelling techniques**

A way of conveying events through words and creative cinematic techniques. Storytelling acquires a role of great importance in non-fiction film, not only as a medium to arouse interest and emotions, but also, if not mainly, as the only legitimate way to hold a discourse on reality, without misleading (Sapino & Hoenisch 2011).

The difference between local and international documentaries will be studied through observations. Comparison will be made between Malaysia and foreign documentaries to extract related factors that contribute to the satisfaction of the viewers. This method allows us to identify which parts that Malaysian documentaries are lack on compared to foreign documentary. This study is also intended to provide some suggestions for future documentary filmmakers in order to help improving documentary scene in Malaysia.

## **1.2 Research Question**

Based on research background above, the research question is:

1. Why documentaries produced in Malaysia is not as impactful as foreign documentaries?

From the main question, the study has come out with supporting questions to be solved which are:

2. What are the weaknesses of Malaysian documentaries compared to foreign documentaries?
3. What are the factors to produce an impactful documentary in Malaysia?

## **1.3 Research Objective**

1. To investigate what is the current situation of Malaysian documentaries production.
2. To analyze the weaknesses of Malaysian produced documentaries compared to foreign documentaries.
3. To recommend on how documentaries production in Malaysia can be improved.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.0 Introduction**

As we know, television nowadays is a necessity in every household. Based on statistic published by The Real Truth, in 2004, average adult American would spent 1,669 hours watching television which is equivalent to 70 days a year and over 4,900 days in the average lifespan(Anon 2004).This phenomenon is called “Television Addiction”. Watching television can be considered as a daily routine to not only American, but people who have television access throughout the world. Documentary is a part of the programs offered by most TV station because of its increasing followers.

Ever since the proliferation of new media, documentary shifted its form to a new format which is called “Database Documentary”. Database documentary is a relatively new form of documentary storytelling that uses the combined elements of digital media and on-line platforms(Cohen 2012).Database documentary is documentary programs published on new media which was introduced to provide the audience with interactive elements such as browsing, linking, sharing and communicating throughout the entire watching process. Hence, besides television new media is another platform available for the audience in accessing documentary programs.

Both of these platforms are also available in Malaysia as the main source for local audience to access documentary materials. A research was recently conducted by H. A.

Karim (2014) on a focus group of 35 multi-racial respondents to record their daily media usage consists of 13 male student and 22 female students, aged between 14-16 years old. The results of the research have discovered that within 14 days, respondents spent 491 hours on television and 122 hours 35 minutes on new media which ranked as the first and second place respectively compared to other media. Out of the total hours spent, they allocated 13 hours 30 minutes in watching documentary programs. From the total hours spent for documentary programs, it is a bitter fact to find out that all of the documentary programs watched were the productions of United States of America. The fact that they are attracted to watch programs from United States of America is due to the openness in their content and astonishing filmmaking techniques(A. Karim 2014).

Although accessibility to local documentary is no longer a barrier to Malaysian, local documentary is still struggling to capture local audience's attention. There might be some good reason behind this issue which might come from the audience side or production side that could be studied. It might not be right to claim that the audience only demanded for entertainment input than factual, as we can see in the study above that local teenagers chose documentary as well in their watching list. It might not be fair also to put the blame on production side because the amount of documentary films produced locally is quite a number. The only thing missing here is the link between the documentary films and the audience that is needed to relate them together as a bridge. The missing link here could be the impact that was transmitted from a documentary film to the audience experience, which means that a good documentary should be able to have an impact to the audience to sustain the audience's interest during and after the watching process.

Therefore, this research aims to extract out the factors to produce an impactful documentary in Malaysia. The investigation will be done on 20 local and international documentaries. From the preliminary investigation, a list of factors is expected to be